

A large, intricate spider web is superimposed over a city skyline at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The city buildings are silhouetted against the sky. A spider is visible on the web, positioned near the center-right. The overall mood is mysterious and ominous.

DEATH'S SHADOW

A Novel

There's no
escaping it

TA MÜLLER-KING

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TA Müller-King

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To Duncan, who helped me figure out why I have wings;
my mother, for the library trips that forged a love of books,
and Uncle Louis, who introduced me to police procedurals

CONTENTS

1. Chapter 1	1
2. Chapter 2	4
3. Chapter 3	10
4. Chapter 4	20

CHAPTER 1

The background is black, the blood that drops from the severed head scarlet. It's held aloft by a multi-armed woman, who is paler than the bodies on the first beach day of the year, but it isn't her – or even the bleeding head – that draws you in for another look; it's her skirt and necklace that do that. The second glance confirms it: the skirt *is* made of arms, the necklace of heads.

She wears non-body-part jewellery, too. Gold chunky bangles, earrings and an elaborate crown, while in the hand not holding the head there's a sword, the blade smeared with blood. Before there's time to decipher the meaning, the screen turns the same hue as the blood and the image is replaced by the words, 'Gaia welcomes you'.

Then the words disappear, taking with them the gore and glitz and replacing it with a dimly lit room. Not an image this time, but a live stream. In the background is an exposed-brick wall. A spotlight, not unlike one you'd see on a theatre stage, beams down. But there are no actors here. Just a man.

Gagged and tied to a chair, he tugs at his restraints. His fear is tangible, it radiates from the screen. It can't be real, it's too disturbing. Yet intriguing too, compelling you to look.

Suddenly, a voice speaks; neither male nor female.

'We live in a world where the rules do not apply to people who have enough money or power. They can ignore inequality, dismiss people's rights, be predacious in work and on the street, and get away with it. Unlike the rest of us, they are above the law.'

'Petitions and lobbying of politicians have done nothing. Governments have not listened. We have been forced to find another way, and today we enter that new phase. One where Lady Justice is back for all.'

'First on trial is a man accused of both failing to protect the innocent and punish those responsible for the crimes committed against them.'

'You might not know him, but think of those friends and loved ones that have been let down by those meant to protect them. Think of the lives ruined because those in charge failed to hear the truth, too embroiled in the populist zeitgeist where there are only lies and manipulation.'

A bar-shaped icon pops up at the bottom of the screen.

'The justice system is broken. If you – or anyone you know – have been denied your rights, or had them ignored, claw back your control by voting now. The concept is from a dating app... where it used to bring couples together, now it will act as a vehicle for change. So, swipe the icon to the right and the man here will be freed. But swipe it to the left, and he will be punished for his crimes.'

Silence follows. Time to contemplate what has been said. Weigh the choices. But the voice isn't finished yet. There's one final sentence, delivered in a quiet tone. Nevertheless, the words shout from the screen.

'The choice is yours!'

CHAPTER 2

It was really early, or very late, depending on your perspective. Despite the sun still not being up on the summer's morning, others were out, like him. They sat at the bus stops because the Tube hadn't yet started running, or in the all-night caff on the high street, alongside the last of the late-night revellers, fortifying themselves before early shifts with hearty fry-ups. Not that he could see what they were eating, obviously. But he was making an informed guess; nobody went to a caff for chia seeds and kefir.

A vision of bacon, eggs, beans, sausages and fried bread popped into his head; so vivid, he could almost smell it in the car. That fried-food aroma that oozed into the fabric of your clothes, turning what was once appetising into a malodorous coating that followed you for the rest of the day. He dry retched. He'd skip breakfast today.

He reached for his water bottle. It was full and the weight of it pulled on his shoulder, ratcheting up the discomfort. 'Fuck!' He needed stronger medication. The ache kept him awake too many

nights. Tonight, the joint was on fire. Maybe it was the pain receptors causing his mind to race and flooding his body with adrenalin, making him jittery. Whatever the cause, he was awake, and driving around on autopilot.

He wasn't sure if he was waiting for the double dose of painkillers to kick in, or if being out was a distraction from his thoughts and a way to tire himself out. So, the driving was aimless. Or it had been. Until now. Now, he had focus. His voice was loud in the car. 'Just ignore it, go home. You need to sleep.' But he was already slowing down, looking for a place to park. There was no fighting it. Might as well accept it.

They walked with the confidence of youth. Naivety or ignorance had them believing they were invincible as they walked past; a gang of three, all linked arms and harmonious giggles. If he was a betting man, he'd put money on none of them being over 18. And he'd raise that bet to them all being oblivious to the danger that stalked them.

It took a moment to find the key hidden at the back of the glove compartment, and another to unlock the concealed box in the console. Finding the item he wanted was easy; it was the only thing inside. It went in his pocket. Just in case. In the time it had taken, the girls had got a bit too far ahead. He increased his strides to catch up; his footfalls silent. They sensed his presence anyway and, halfway down the alleyway, they turned as one to face him.

'Are you following us?' demanded the brunette with the smudged eye liner. This made the others laugh, although he couldn't see what was funny about the question.

'Morning, ladies. I think it would be best if you came with me,' he said. Undaunted by his 6ft 3in frame, and unaware of his strength, the short one with blonde hair that must have started the night in an

elaborate updo but was now half undone, pointed her finger at him. 'Look, Mister, you're too old for us, okay? Leave us alone!'

'Yeah, leave us alone,' added the thin one with an afro like Foxy Cleopatra's. Did any of them even know who that was? Unlikely. He was probably their age when he saw the movie... They giggled and turned away, the message clear: they were done with him. But doing the same to the men who now blocked their path was going to be more difficult. The laughter died, probably at the same time they realised they were cut off on both sides.

The men, however, didn't seem the least bit concerned by his presence. Probably liking their three-to-one odds. *Another betting metaphor. I might have to play the Lottery when I'm done.* 'Get behind me!' he said, motioning to the girls. They were unsure, and he couldn't blame them. But they followed his instruction, anyway. Maybe not that much of a surprise when you looked at the three men blocking their way. Clearly, he was the better option.

The men were too lean, like fighting dogs who've been starved to make them more aggressive; an air of unrestrained violence vibrated around them. Individually, none was as tall or big as him, but together they'd easily leave their mark. He recognised their type; a fair fight was a foreign concept. So, keeping his tone neutral, his air relaxed, and his hands in his pockets, he said, 'Morning, fellas. Let's not start the day with regrets. It would be best if you go your way, and we'll go ours. Yah?'

The jumpy one with teeth not unlike a rodent sneered at him. 'Why don't you fuck off, granddad, and let us have our fun. *Yah?*'

The others laughed with their leader.

So much for doing things the easy way. True, this morning he did feel older than his 38 years, but he was no grandfather. What were the alternatives? Nothing had happened – yet – so the police wouldn't be able to do much; more time would be spent filling out forms than the men would in custody. Then they'd be free to do exactly what they liked by lunchtime. His eyes roamed casually around the area. No CCTV. That was something. 'Walk away,' he said, his voice quiet but full of authority. 'Now!'

The men started laughing again, igniting the anger that still simmered inside him. He inhaled deeply – like his meditation app advocated – held it for a few seconds, then released it. The shit really did work; calmness flooded his body, overriding the tension. Then he moved.

Quick on his feet despite his size, the Taser took rat-face to the floor before the others registered what was happening. Taking advantage of the surprise, he swung a fist, knocking the second to the ground, and turned quickly to face the third at his back. But he was rubbing his eyes and moaning as he stumbled away; made short work of by the woman with an aerosol deodorant in her hand. She shrugged and Spider smiled. *Not completely defenceless, then.*

When he turned back, the other men had also gone. Would they be back, with friends? They couldn't hang around to find out. Moving quickly, Spider and the women exited the alley, heading for the high street where there would be more people and, more importantly, cameras. If they were jumped now, someone would see.

The men had been tracking the girls' movements. How could he simply drive past after he'd seen that? He'd debated calling a patrol car but if it arrived too late, the damage would have been done. He was

no vigilante but tonight he'd gone off-piste, doing what needed to be done, an instinct of sorts kicking in when vulnerable girls were at risk; his Achilles heel. He didn't need a shrink to explain his actions, he understood them all too well. He'd failed to protect the one he should have, and he lived with that every day. It wasn't going to happen again.

Of course, while he'd been in the right place at the right time tonight, there was always the worry that he hadn't stopped the attack, just delayed it. That the men would be back another night, with their focus trained on other victims, and that there would be no one to stop them. "*That way madness lies.*" Tonight, he'd moved things on in a positive way, that had to be enough.

The girls were huddled together. Up close, they looked even younger. Smudged eyeliner had already showcased she was the leader and she took charge again now. 'I'm Phoebe, that's Rosie,' she pointed to the shorter one who'd wielded the spray can, 'and she's Clemmie.'

'You strike me as clever girls,' said Spider, 'so do me a favour, even if it means a longer walk, don't go down deserted alleyways before the sun's up. I know there's three of you, but do you think that would have made a difference to those men?'

They avoided looking at him.

'Don't risk it, okay?'

'Who put you in charge?' demanded Phoebe.

At least they were getting their spirit back. Things could have ended up very differently for them tonight.

'Shut up, Phoebe!' said Clemmie. 'He saved us.'

'But who says he's not just another creep?' asked Rosie.

At least someone was thinking straight. 'I'm Spider,' he said.

‘Is that meant to make us feel better?’ asked Clemmie, ‘because I *hate* spiders.’ She shivered exaggeratedly.

He flagged down a cab, spoke to the driver and handed over some cash. ‘Jacob, here, is going to take you wherever you need to get to, alright?’

‘How do we know it’s safe?’ asked Rosie.

‘Message whoever’s at home to expect you, and keep your phones out, and ready to dial 999. And if you need anything, take this.’ He handed each a card with his contact details. Rosie studied it while the other two put theirs away.

‘Really?’ she asked, trying to hold in her laugh.

‘Indeed.’ Exasperated, despite this being how people had reacted to his name almost the whole of his life. Rosie held out the card to the others, but he closed the car door before they also had a chance to react. He stood watching the car drive down the empty street.

What a strange night. The jitteriness had worn off, leaving him exhausted. If he headed straight home, he could get a couple of hours’ sleep before the day began properly. While not suspicious by nature, his gut was telling him he was going to need as much rest as he could get.

CHAPTER 3

It was going to be another hot day. Thank goodness they were in a fairly new building with air-con. Spider didn't think he could cope with being overheated along with everything else. People love summer and everything it brings. In London that meant al fresco dining, drinking outside pubs, swimming in the lidos. But that was the idyllic version for people either on holiday or with lots of time on their hands. For those working, it meant travelling on the Tube with temperatures that exceeded what was safe for transporting livestock, and daylight that fooled you into working late because you thought it was earlier than it was. But maybe that was just him.

He was on his second coffee of the morning, and was regretting it on his empty stomach, especially as it was failing to provide any get-up-and-go after his long, sleep-deprived night. The adrenalin from earlier had worn off and the sleep he'd had was not enough. He stifled a yawn while he answered the phone, 'DCI Parker.' Spider jotted down

a few details and shouted into the main office, ‘Regan, put your skates on, we’ve got a body.’

As he walked down the stairs, the notion of this murder was providing an invigorating boost the caffeine had failed to do. Undoubtedly macabre, but it put a smile on his face, and the words of Sherlock Holmes sprang to mind: “The game is afoot”. Was it misplaced enthusiasm? Probably. But he dismissed that idea, along with the fact that the quote was originally from Shakespeare, not Conan Doyle.

Regan’s footsteps pounded behind him on the stairs. Although a part of their MIT, or Major Investigation Team, for almost three months, Detective Sergeant Grace Regan was still not a fully accepted part of it. Police were a naturally suspicious bunch, and the rumours made the rest of his team a little uneasy. Hoping to lead by example, he’d taken to partnering with her.

Time would undoubtedly show them she could be a valuable member of the team. There was a doggedness about her. If something didn’t quite fit in her head, she pursued it relentlessly. But she’d learned the hard way that that didn’t always get the results you hoped for. He hoped she knew better than to repeat that same mistake.

‘Where are we headed, Guv?’ she asked as she climbed into the passenger seat.

He keyed the postcode for the crime scene into the navigation system. ‘Some hall in South Ealing. A homeless person went looking for a place to sleep and found a body. That’s as much as I’ve been told.’

She rubbed her hands together. ‘My first London murder.’

Her enthusiasm had Spider biting his lip against making the obvious retort, ‘And it’s just the start.’

Spider parked on the road down from the cordoned-off area. It was a nondescript building on a patch of ground that had probably been lawn in another life, but was now mostly soil and weeds, except for a small green patch under a large tree on the side. Set slightly back from the street, it was the sort of place that would be used as a Cub Scouts hall or for school fetes, but now it had a neglected, unused feel. The door, once a vibrant sky-blue before most of the paint had flaked off, stood open.

‘A day like today, we might be less on the medium-rare and more on the fully cooked side by the time we’re done,’ said Spider, as they both pulled on the plastic protective gear. Even on the coldest day they were enough to raise your body temperature and, by the time Spider approached the door, a trickle of perspiration was making a slow slide down his back.

Ignoring the physical discomfort, Spider showed his warrant card to the uniform overseeing the log book. Regan did the same, while a couple of SOCOs came past them, grim faced and silent. The unmistakable stench of blood followed behind them. Was Regan ready for whatever waited for them? She had no idea what she was heading into with her first London murder. Spider caught her eye, silent communication passing between them. She nodded, then they stepped inside.

The foot plates started at the door. The crime-scene equivalent of a trail of breadcrumbs, these led them to the heart of the hall where large lights were set up in an inward-facing circle, like a macabre parody of a fashion shoot. Except rather than a flawless model posing in the dazzle, a man lay on the floor, covered with blood.

Although there were a number of people about, moving around gathering evidence, the room was quiet. Was it shock, outrage or a combination that had everyone going about their jobs without the usual chatter? The weight of the situation settled across Spider's shoulders. They were walking in the footsteps of a murderer.

There was blood everywhere. Ghostly fingers trailed up his spine. A body contains roughly five litres of blood but, by the looks of it, little of that could have remained in the victim. It had seeped into his clothes, splattered around him, and flowed across the floor where it had pooled in places, dried in others; the redness turning almost black. Within it was a recurring pattern of white, uniform squares.

The victim's arms and legs were stretched out and tied to giant, heavy-duty nails that had been hammered into the wooden floor. They looked like the kind usually used to secure large tents. Naked from the waist down, he wore a collared shirt and a light cardigan that showed little of the yellow colour it would have been when he'd put it on. Artists popped into Spider's mind: da Vinci, no doubt because of the pose that echoed the Vitruvian Man, and Jackson Pollock for obvious reasons.

Regan grabbed his arm. She didn't look good and clearly wasn't seeing the scene through the same artistic framework that he was. 'I'll go speak to the first responder.'

Spider nodded. It was best she got some fresh air, not least because Rowley would have a fit if she threw up in here. He moved closer to the body, stepping gingerly from one foot plate to another. The victim looked like someone's grandfather. Thinking like that wouldn't do any good, so he honed in on the details instead: the man was

Caucasian, his grey hair sparse on top, his legs thin and with visible spider veins. *Evil truly has no boundaries*, he thought.

The victim looked to be in his sixties, maybe older, making it even stranger that it looked like he was sticking out his tongue. Spider went closer. Something was definitely sticking out of his mouth, but it wasn't his tongue.

He called out to the man on his left, who was instructing the SOCO taking photographs. 'Morning, Rowley.'

Dr Rowley Knight, the medical examiner, was almost entirely enclosed in protective gear. On his large frame, it looked odd, like a wrestler who'd been squeezed into a giant, plastic Baby-gro. Focusing on the man rather than the body in front of him, Spider's tone was intentionally light and superficial. 'Well now, isn't this an interesting start to the day, murder and mayhem before breakfast...'

'No!' said Rowley, ignoring Spider's attempt at light-heartedness. 'I didn't even have time to make a coffee...'

'Heaven help us,' muttered Spider.

'I heard that,' said Rowley.

Spider bent down to get a better look. The sight of blood had never bothered him, which was a small mercy for the job he had to do, but the strong smell of it wasn't doing his empty stomach any favours. He'd gladly swap it for the fried-food smell that had turned his stomach earlier. Saliva pooled in his mouth, forcing him to swallow.

From this level, Spider could see a cufflink peeping out of the victim's left sleeve, along with a watch that would have cost more than most people earned in a year. The victim's neck was a gaping wound, and stab wounds across his stomach and torso created a gory, abstract design on his clothing.

‘Was he poisoned then?’ asked Spider.

Rowley rolled his eyes. ‘His abdomen was sliced open with what looks like one deep cut,’ he said, lifting up the victim’s shirt to show the wound. ‘With additional stab wounds surrounding it.’

‘Did the deep one kill him?’

‘More likely it was this.’ Rowley pointed at the gaping wound. ‘His throat has been slashed twice – the cuts almost decapitated him... and one nicked the carotid artery, which will account for most of the blood spatter you see.’

‘That implies a frenzied attack, maybe spontaneous. But him being restrained contradicts that...’

‘I’d be surprised if this was an impulse kill... there’s order in the chaos,’ said Rowley.

‘What do you mean?’

Rowley swept his arm across the room. ‘Firstly, those white squares.’

Spider frowned. ‘Indeed. Do I need to check your foot-plate inventory?’

‘You got me. Sick of cutting up dead people, I decided to try a live one instead.’ Rowley rolled his eyes. ‘The killer must have used foot plates, or some equivalent, which enabled him to avoid leaving any footprints. No mean feat with all this blood.’

Spider visualised the kill. ‘So he planned ahead, put them down before he stabbed him, so he could use them to move around afterwards, then removed them.’

‘Cold, isn’t it?’

‘Can you get anything from the squares?’

Rowley shrugged, and gestured to the victim. ‘Some wounds look slightly different. Even with the naked eye you can see how this one at the top,’ he pulled the shirt away from the neck and circled his finger above a stab wound, ‘looks like it’s wider and longer than this one,’ he indicated a cut on the left. ‘And I’m sure I’ll find different depths, too.’

‘So what, a *Murder On The Orient Express* copycat?’ asked Spider, staring at the man’s mouth.

Rowley narrowed his eyes. ‘That’s what *you* need to work out. It looks like different knives were used, which could suggest multiple attackers. But perhaps one knife broke off and another one was used instead... I’ll be able to tell you more once I’ve done the post-mortem.’

‘What’s with the cardboard in the mouth?’

‘I was about to remove it when you arrived.’ Using large tweezers, Rowley pulled it out without any resistance and held it in the air. It was rectangular in shape, and roughly 8cm x 6cm in size. The side closest to him showed the female symbol: ♀, but when Rowley turned it he saw that, like a playing card, the two sides were different. On the back of this one was an image of a woman clutching a bloody knife and a severed head in two of her multiple arms. Spider recognised her. He rifled through his memories while he studied her.

‘I think she might be Kali,’ he said, ‘if I remember correctly...’

‘Is that your Spidey sense kicking in?’ scoffed Rowley, ‘or is that the sort of thing they teach you at public school?’

Spider gave Rowley a discreet finger while he stared at the image and tried to remember what he knew about her.

Rowley raised an eyebrow. ‘A finger doesn’t scare me, you know...’

‘She a goddess. Of death, maybe... but if so, she only killed demons, I think.’

‘Hmm, that says so much about the schooling system, doesn’t it? No kings and PMs for you lot. No, it’s goddesses you learn about,’ he joked. ‘But despite my humble state-school education, I feel I need to direct you to the obvious.’ He bobbed his head towards the victim. ‘He’s human. Not demonic. So whatever she’s *meant* to kill is of little consolation to our victim.’

‘Too right. Any idea when he was killed?’

Rowley checked the body temperature reading. ‘He’s been here less than a day.’

‘Find any identification?’

Rowley shook his head. ‘He looks like someone will be expecting him home, though...’

‘Let’s hope you’re right,’ said Spider. ‘Why were his trousers removed? Any sign of a sexual attack, or genital mutilation?’

‘Nothing evident.’

‘So why strip him?’ Spider gestured towards the victim’s clothing items that were in a pile in a corner.

‘You’re the policeman.’ Rowley took swabs from the body, meticulously labelling each one as he went. ‘It reminds me of those attacks,’ he mused, ‘women who’ve been assaulted and murdered and are left with their skirts flipped up... Like the violence they were exposed to wasn’t enough, they have to be humiliated in death, too. A final insult.’

That triggered something in Spider’s mind, something familiar but just out of reach... the recollection playing hide-and-seek in his subconscious. Spider knew better than to push it. Left to its own devices, it would reveal itself eventually.

He walked around the scene, taking in everything, including Regan at the side of the hall, studying a noticeboard. She turned as he approached, and he got the full impact of her heterochromia. Her eyes reminded him of the ocean; the right one – the blue one – was like the sea on a bright summer's day, while the left was the green it turned during a storm. Was one more appropriate for her personality than the other? If so, which one? If they worked together long enough, maybe he'd find out.

'It looks like this used to be a meeting place for the local Women's Institute, Guv. Before it was abandoned. The notices on the board are from years ago...'

It was difficult to imagine women getting together here with its current look, which was more slaughterhouse than knitting group. She started to tell him what she'd learned from the first responders but he excused himself when Rowley motioned him over.

He moved closer to Spider, lowering his voice. 'I've got this one – "star struck",' he said, raising his eyebrows. 'See, the layout of the body, like five points of a *star*? And the stabbings, you know, *struck* with a knife...'

'You're a sick puppy, you know that?' said Spider, not in the least bit surprised by what Rowley had said because this was something they'd been doing since they first started sharing crime scenes. Labelling the scene was a way to detach themselves from the reality, from the person or people who had been killed, and the violence that had been used to do it. To anyone looking on, it may seem highly inappropriate, and probably was, but their intention was in no way meant to disrespect the victim. It was just a way to get them through the difficult aspects

of their jobs, keeping them focused on the important part, catching the perpetrator of the crime.

Rowley raised a brow in response. 'It takes all sorts, my friend, all sorts. And thank god for that!'

'When do you think you'll have more for me, Row?'

'I'll let you know when we start. Most likely tomorrow sometime.'

Spider went to find Regan, thoughts racing around his head. What sort of person was responsible for this death? Despite how films depicted it, stabbing someone – going through all those layers of skin, muscle and tissue – was not an easy thing to do. And to do it multiple times. That suggested some dedication. And strength. Maybe natural, possibly adrenalin fuelled. Did the killer have justification, or was he simply a psychopath? Spider exhaled the breath he hadn't known he was holding. Time would surely reveal all.

CHAPTER 4

Regan had already disposed of her protective gear and was wiping her forehead with a tissue when Spider joined her outside. ‘Are you okay?’ he asked, noting the pallor of her skin against the dark hair that was pulled into a messy ponytail.

‘I’m fine,’ she said, the wobble in her voice so slight he almost missed it.

‘I have water in the car, if you want?’

‘I’m fine. If I’m pale, you can blame my dad for my Scottish/Irish blood.’ Her laugh sounded strained.

Spider didn’t point out the obvious that a) he hadn’t said a word about how, since the crime scene, the colour had drained from her face, and b) she must not be feeling “fine” if she was aware of her pastiness.

‘Really, I’ll be okay,’ she said.

Okay, that was more truthful; she wasn’t alright but she had it under control. He could work with that. ‘What did the uniforms have

to say?’ he asked, guiding her focus back to procedures and away from the murder victim.

‘Uniforms responded to a 999 call from the corner shop.’ She checked her notes, the tenseness in her body visibly easing now she was no longer talking about herself. ‘Mr Bartosz, the owner, called it in. They were first on the scene. Other than the witness who reported it, they didn’t see anything else. The door was unlocked and, well,’ she cleared her throat, ‘there was obviously no need for them to go into the hall, so they called us.’

The only reason the officers would have disturbed the crime scene was if there was a chance of saving the victim, something that had clearly not been an option here. ‘Is that the homeless man?’ asked Spider, inclining his head toward the paramedic’s van, the doors of which were open, giving a glimpse of someone sitting in the back.

Regan nodded. ‘They’re checking he’s not in shock after finding the body. I was going to interview him after I’ve spoken to Mr Bartosz.’

‘Why don’t you speak to the shop owner, and I’ll interview the homeless man?’

‘Okay. See you back here,’ said Regan.

In the time they’d been inside, the temperature had risen a little more, and Spider, still in his protective suit was, as predicted, feeling a bit like a chicken cooked in one of those roasting bags. He peeled it off, feeling the relief of the air on his damp skin and the way his temperature dropped, even though the warm air offered little in the way of coolness.

He was thirsty. As quickly as he could, he stuffed the disposable suit, shoes covers and gloves into the paper bag, sealing it before handing it to a forensic investigator who would pass it on for incineration,

and headed to the car for that water he'd offered Regan. The ice had long since melted but it had done its job and the liquid was refreshingly cold. He drank until there was movement in his peripheral vision; the paramedics were finished with the witness.

Feeling a little more human now that he was hydrated and his temperature a bit more normal, he was ready to chat to the homeless man, who had moved to the wall in the shade of the tree. While the leafy branches did offer a minuscule respite from the heat, it was certainly not enough to warrant the big coat the man wore over a red jumper. Spider was getting hot again just looking at his layers of clothing.

He stood as Spider approached, a real mountain of a man who was not dissimilar to the image Spider saw in his own mirror – they were about the same height but, where Spider carried very little excess weight, the man was large under the coat; an anomaly for a homeless person, but perhaps he was not long on the streets. His hair was the same deep black, but he wore his long, and where Spider's facial hair was neatly clipped, his beard and moustache were shaggy.

'Morning, I'm DCI Parker. Are you alright to chat for a few moments?' Spider's gaze swept over him, looking for any speck of blood, but it was an unproductive search.

He nodded. 'I don't think I'll be much help, though.'

His accent caught Spider by surprise, although he tried to hide it. So much for being above unconscious bias; here was the proof, smacking him in the face. Because what he had been expecting was not to hear the same cut-glass accent as his own. Clearing his throat gave Spider a few moments to think. Going back to his original train of thought, Spider said, 'There might be something you saw or heard that might help—'

‘I didn’t see anything other than the body.’

So, he was dealing with a cool customer. Ironic considering all those damn clothing layers. ‘Okay,’ said Spider, ‘let’s start with your name.’

‘William.’

‘Last name?’ Spider pulled out a notebook, an old-fashioned one with a pen stuck in the side. Something about the physicality of it, the link between his mind and hand creating the letters as he wrote, made him think better than if he typed on an electronic pocket notebook. Old school, Alex, the youngest member of his team, called it. ‘And tell me how you came to be here?’

‘I was looking to put my head down somewhere for a few hours. I’ve been coming here for a few months, and it’s always empty.’

‘Did you use the front door?’

William shook his head. ‘It’s always been locked. I use the window round the back. The latch is broken.’

‘So you didn’t touch the front door?’ If he did, the scene of crime officer’s analysis would reveal his fingerprints (and he would definitely be fingerprinted before they were done with him) but Spider’s question was more about establishing whether he was telling the truth.

William shook his head.

‘Because it was unlocked when the uniformed officers arrived,’ said Spider. ‘Not forced, but unlocked.’

‘I haven’t tried it since the first time. Your killer must have unlocked it. Nobody else had any need to.’

Spider was thinking the same thing. ‘What time did you get here?’

‘Close to 5am.’

‘Isn’t that late to get a place to sleep?’

William shrugged. 'It's cooler inside on these hot days, and if you catch people after a night out they can be more generous with their handouts. The Tube's a good spot, and it's only a few blocks up, so not far to come here to sleep afterwards.'

Spider nodded as if he understood the concept, which of course he didn't. How could he? He'd never had to depend on other people's generosity to keep him fed, or get him a bed for the night. Guilt bubbled up but he ignored it. 'So, you climbed in the window, then what?'

William rubbed his thick beard. 'I saw the man lying there.'

'Did you go into the room, or approach the body?'

'There was no point,' said William. 'He was obviously dead. I climbed out again and went to Mr Bartosz, who owns the shop down the road. I know he lives above it and could call the police.'

There were no obvious signs of stress to indicate he was lying. In fact, William was incredibly calm. Almost too calm for someone who had just found a man killed in such a violent manner. 'Did you see anything unusual in the hall, besides the body? Anything out of place, or different to normal?'

'Nothing obvious. But I wasn't in there for very long.'

Spider was trying to get his measure and failing. 'And you didn't see anyone hanging around, or nearby when you went to the shop?'

'No, the streets were quiet, pretty empty. And I think I would have noticed a blood-splattered individual.'

Considering Spider had studied William's clothing for traces of blood when he'd first approached him, he couldn't dispute the logic of that. 'Is there a way to get hold of you, if we have more questions?'

‘I don’t suppose I’m going to be able to use this hall for a time... I’ll be in the area, though.’

‘In South Ealing?’ asked Spider.

‘Around Ealing. I move around the borough.’

That would explain why he looked familiar. If he hung around in Spider’s own patch, he’d probably seen him before.

Back in the office, someone had stuck a picture of the victim on to the board, along with the Kali image. The team dotted around the room was a motley bunch if ever there was one. Spider could divide them according to age – they certainly had the clichéd newbie in the form of DC Alex Kydd, who was 23, and DI Vince Ward, the always impeccably dressed veteran he had worked with for close to 10 years now – but age wasn’t important to Spider. It was about how you got the job done. His team worked hard, and they had his back. That was what mattered; loyalty was earned, and no small achievement.

‘Right,’ he addressed the room. ‘We have an unidentified victim, possibly in his sixties, maybe older, viciously stabbed multiple times – and a card with these images,’ Spider knocked on the board where images of Kali and the female symbol sat next to each other, ‘was stuffed into his mouth.’

‘His prints are not in the system, and house-to-house enquiries around the hall haven’t revealed anything useful, so far. Can you follow up on that?’ Spider asked Harry, whose dimpled cheeks gave his face a touch of the angelic that led people to underestimate him – something Harry used to his advantage, and the surprise of more

than a few interviewees. ‘It was a bloody crime scene... the murderer must have been covered in blood. Not something you’d easily miss... Someone must have seen something. As for the crime scene, it’s a hall that has been abandoned for some time – looks like the last people to use it was a WI group.’

‘Are we looking for a killer granny?’ smirked Alex.

Everyone ignored him.

‘Must be a local, surely?’ said Harry. ‘Someone who knew the place was deserted.’

‘I agree,’ said Spider. ‘It’s probably an opportunistic kill site, so don’t think we need to spend too much time on it. Time will be better spent finding out who our victim is, how he ended up in that hall, and who killed him, of course.’

‘Did we find his phone?’ asked Alex.

‘No, that and his wallet were gone, everything else was left on or near the body – his watch, cufflinks, clothes.’

‘How are we meant to find out who he is, then, without bank cards, driver’s license or fingerprints?’

Before he could answer Alex’s question, the file being waved in the air caught Spider’s attention. ‘What do you have, Vince? he asked, motioning him to the front of the room.

‘Photos from forensics of the victim’s clothes,’ said Vince, taping them to the board. ‘The labels show non-high-street brands–’

‘Isn’t that the same insignia as yours?’ asked Harry, pointing to where Vince’s jacket today – a lightweight beige, mohair blend that matched his trousers – hung over the back of the chair he’d wheeled closer to the board.

The colour that briefly flushed Vince's cheeks was the only sign that he'd heard Harry. 'The main point,' he said, 'is with his trousers being from Savile Row, we might be able to find out who he is.'

'Is that where you go, Vince? Some mint suit shop, like that one in that film, what's it called?' Alex clicked his fingers repeatedly while he thought. Pointing his fingers in the shape of a gun at Vince, he called out triumphantly, '*Kingsman*.'

'Exactly like that, yes.' But Vince's sarcasm washed over the young detective like water off a duck's back. Looking undaunted, Vince continued. 'Secondly, it means our victim was probably financially successful, and people with that sort of life and background don't disappear without anyone noticing.'

'He could buy things on credit,' said Harry. 'Lots of people do.'

'Everybody does,' said Alex, looking around. 'Don't they? Just me, then,' he muttered into the silence.

'Either way, there will be a history of payment,' agreed Spider. 'Perfect. I'll leave that to you, Vince.'

'Going back to the hall,' said Regan. 'It might not have been used for a time but the lights still work, and there's running water in both the kitchen and bathroom in the back...'

'Someone's paying for that,' said Vince, the one member of the team who had less of a problem with Regan. She nodded in agreement.

'Might just be an oversight...' said Spider, 'but check who's paying the bills.'

'What's with the strange-looking woman on the card?' asked Alex.

'I believe she's Kali – the goddess of death. And she's where things get a little more complicated.'

‘More so than an almost decapitated man?’ Alex pulled a face. ‘How do you know who she is, Guv?’

‘From a book we had at home, when I was a child—’

‘Jeez, strange bedtime reading, Guv,’ said Alex. ‘Mine was Harry Potter...’

Spider bit back a smile. ‘I don’t know, goddesses aren’t that different to wizards, are they?’

‘There’s no comparison, Guv,’ said Alex, shaking his head so seriously it made the others smile, too. Except Harry, who Spider guessed wasn’t a fan of either even before he said, ‘Can we get back to real things? I mean, what are we thinking?’ This last bit was addressed to Spider. ‘Do you think the killer’s someone who’s into iconography, or could the image have a religious meaning?’

‘I don’t know. I think it’s safe to assume it has some relevance for the murderer, so we need to understand what she represents, and what the killer was trying to say by leaving her image on the victim. I might have someone who can help with that, so leave it with me. More worrying for me is why the card was left at all...’

‘Because the meaning isn’t obvious, is it?’ said Vince. ‘You’d think if you wanted to send a message that you would make it very clear – you know, a sign around the victim’s neck that said “thief”, “rapist” or “child molester” – not one that creates more confusion.’

‘Maybe it’s just for the killer, some weird compulsion... or love of Kali. Maybe other people don’t need to understand,’ suggested Harry.

‘I really hope you’re right,’ said Spider, ‘because I don’t want to think about the alternative...’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Alex.

‘That’s it’s just one of a sequence... and the meaning will only become clear when we have more of them...’

Alex perked up at that. ‘Like a serial killer?’

The others snorted. ‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, mate,’ said Harry. Once the banter had died down, Spider continued, ‘I’m waiting to hear from Dr Knight about the post-mortem.’

Regan asked, ‘What about the female symbol? The victim is male, so is the card there to show he supported women, or a woman, in a way that the killer didn’t like? Or is it the opposite, a sign accusing him of being like a misogynist or something?’

Alex’s voice was loud and disparaging across the room. ‘Don’t be a numpty, no woman would have done that.’

Regan’s voice, in comparison, was quietly contradictory. ‘I didn’t say it was a woman, but the symbol must mean something.’

Spider stepped in before it became a slanging match between the two. ‘Like Kali, the symbol must be there for a reason, we just don’t know what that is – yet. Once we know more about the victim, we’ll figure it out... Alex, check CCTV in the area. If we can pick up our victim, maybe see where he came from, there might be witnesses who saw him, and perhaps his killer, too. And once we have his identity, that’ll help us uncover why someone wanted him dead.’

‘It’s more than that, though, isn’t it?’ said Harry. ‘One fatal stab wound and he would have been dead. But this was dragged out, vindictive.’

‘And pinned like that to the floor, it’s like the killer took pleasure in it, displaying him like a trophy,’ added Vince.

Spider stretched his neck to the side until it clicked. Things were going from bad to worse. Not only did they have an unidentified

victim, but the killer was a sadist. An unsettling feeling churned in Spider's stomach.